

GEOGRAPHY OF THE NILE - 1

■ 4,145 miles

With an astounding length of 4,145 miles, the Nile River is the longest river in the world, and the only major river that flows south to north. The lifeblood of Egypt, the Nile originates in central Africa, where two river systems, the Blue Nile and the White Nile, begin their flow north. Fed by many smaller tributaries, the river flows through Rwanda, Zaire, Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia before reaching Egypt and then emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. The Blue Nile has its beginnings in the Mufumbiro Mountains in Ethiopia. The White Nile begins near the equator in the Ruwenzori Mountains on the border of Zaire and Uganda. These were the fabled "Mountains of the Moon," never seen by Ptolemy, but believed by him to be the source of the Nile. Ruwenzori means "rainmaker," an apt description for a place with 360 days of rain a year. Even in years of very low rainfall in East Africa, when the Blue Nile is almost dry, the White Nile flows strong. Lake Victoria is in Uganda, close to the source of the White Nile. When he reached this lake, the British explorer Stanley, one of the first Europeans to see Lake Victoria, mistakenly thought he had found the source of the Nile.

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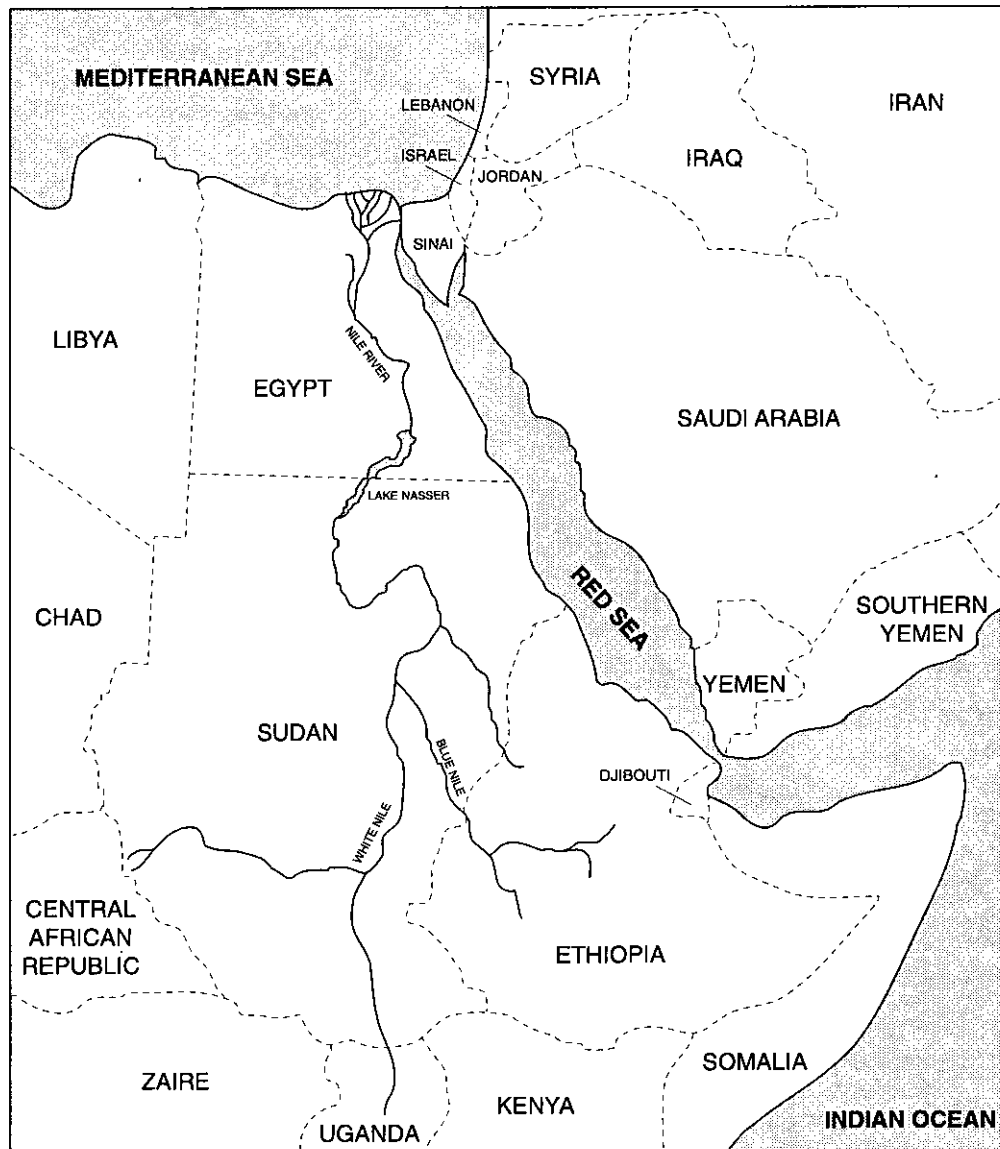
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■ The White Nile and the Blue Nile

These two rivers join together at Khartoum, just above the sixth cataract in what is now Sudan. In ancient times Sudan was known as the kingdom of Nubia or Kush, with its capital city of Napata, and later, Meroe. Nubia extended from the sixth cataract to the first cataract, a distance of approximately 700 miles along the Nile.



GEOGRAPHY OF THE NILE - 2

■ Egyptian borders

For much of ancient Egypt's history, the southern border of Egypt was the first cataract at Elephantine. The cataracts of the Nile protected Egypt from southern attacks, just as the eastern and western deserts and delta marshes formed natural barriers to invading armies. Egyptians at various times in their history were concerned about invasions from the south. Around 1900 B.C., a series of mud-brick forts were built near the Second Cataract to guard against invasion from Nubia. They served as military garrisons, trading posts, and housing for the soldiers and their families.

■ Egypt's heart

At times ancient Egypt included parts of present day Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, but its heart was the thin strip of land along the Nile River between the first cataract and the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile River valley was a long narrow corridor of fertile land, rarely wider than 12 miles and sometimes only one mile wide until it reached the lower Egyptian delta. The Nile on a map looks like a lotus (waterlily), with the delta blooming on top of the narrow stem of Upper Egypt. It could be said to be the largest oasis in the world, bringing water and life to what would otherwise be a bleak desert. The Greek, Herodotus, called Egypt "the gift of the Nile." An ancient Egyptian hymn to the god Hapi, god of the Nile, begins:

"Homage to you, O Hapi! You come forth in this land and come in peace to make Egypt live ... You water the fields which Ra has created; you make all animals live; you make the land drink without ceasing; you come down the path of heaven; you are the friend of meat and drink; you give grain; and you make each farm flourish ... You make the whole world to be ploughed up by the cattle so nobles and farmers can lie down to rest ... When you shine upon the earth, there is rejoicing, all the people are glad, the mighty man receives his meat, and every tooth has food to consume."

■ Rich soil

The richness of the soil came from the annual flooding of the Nile with its deposits of minerals and nutrient-rich black silt. The height of the floodwaters, determined thousands of miles away by the rains of central Africa, often meant the difference between feast and famine for the Egyptians. If the Nile was too high, it meant ruined homes and drowned villages. A "low" Nile, particularly if it occurred several years in a row, could mean drought and famine, for there would be less land to sow. The height of the flood was so important the Egyptians devised nilometers upriver to the south to measure the waters. A flood depth of 12 cubits on the nilometer meant starvation and death. A flood level of 16 cubits meant a year of plenty.

■ Three seasons

The Egyptians divided their year into three seasons based on the behavior of the Nile. The "Inundation," the time of the flood, was approximately from June to September. During this season the Egyptians often worked for Pharaoh or the temples on building projects. The "Emergence" of the land from the water covering them was from October to about February. The soil was moist throughout this time, the time for planting. The Egyptians would use shadufs to fill irrigation ditches and catch some of the receding waters in catch basins for later use

during the last of the three seasons, the "Drought". During the Drought season they would harvest crops and thresh grain.

